

## **From Boom to Backwater: The fate of Famagusta in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and after**

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This paper deals with the question ‘What caused the comparably poor state of repair of many buildings and structures within the walled city of Famagusta, while the fortifications are considerably better preserved?’ The Ottoman conquest of 1571 put an end to a splendid period in Famagusta’s history. The onset of Lusignan rule had in a short time led to an economic boom. Cyprus not only produced expensive and highly sought-after luxury goods (including sugar), but also served as an important trading post and emporium. With the end of the crusader states in 1291, Cyprus became the easternmost outpost of western Christian influence and consequently a vital station for trade with luxury items of the Near and Middle East. Famagusta benefited greatly from this situation: as early as in 1336 a German pilgrim remarked admiringly: “It is the richest of all cities and her citizens are the richest of men.” As Mediterranean trading powers Genoa and Venice were aware of the commercial and strategic value of Famagusta, in the 1370s the city was first under Genoese control and passed into the hands of Venice in 1489.

Famagusta had already been fortified under Lusignan rule, but advances in military technology made it imperative to expand and modernize the fortifications. In the paper, fortifications are regarded as an indicator of the value an occupying power gives the occupied territory. The paper argues that Venice invested sufficient energy and funding into the fortifications of Famagusta in order to enable it to withstand every Ottoman assault during the siege of 1571. In the end the city was in fact handed over to the Ottomans due to the threat of starvation. The text used for analysing the performance of the fortifications during the siege was written by count Nestore Martinengo, an Italian nobleman in the service of Venice, who renders a brief but informative and lively account of the conquest.

The paper argues that there were three main factors causing the poor state of preservation of the buildings in the walled city: first, the Ottoman authorities were well aware that Famagusta was an impressive stronghold, which they intended to use (and consequently kept) in good shape. In order to deprive the potentially untrustworthy Christian population of the protection of the fortress, Christians were banished from the walled city, thus eradicating the need for churches. The Muslim population transferred into Famagusta was comparably smaller and was sufficiently well served by only a number of churches turned into mosques. Second, Cyprus in general and Famagusta in particular soon suffered the effects of global changes: the discovery of the direct sea route to India and the Americas in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century meant that, by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the eastern Mediterranean lost its importance as a trade route. The Ottoman conquest turned Famagusta (and Cyprus) from a trading post and emporium into a mere island in an Ottoman ‘lake’. The declining importance as a trading post and frequent outbreaks of plague led to population decline. Finally, since 1974 the story of Famagusta becoming a backwater through conquest has been repeated: since that time Cyprus has been divided: the TRNC is not recognised internationally, and legal obstacles prevent the execution of direly needed reparation and protection works. The fact that since 2008 Famagusta has been put on the list of the 100 most endangered historical heritage sites is proving that point. Yet, as the paper argues, this

sad situation is merely another chapter in Famagusta's long history from boom town to backwater.